

**From:** Doug Mccurry

**Sent:** Thursday, January 17, 2019 2:35 PM

**To:** Doug Mccurry <[doug MCCURRY@achievementfirst.org](mailto:doug MCCURRY@achievementfirst.org)>

**Subject:** Important news from AF Amistad HS (please read)

**AF Team (all school and network staff) –**

An unfortunate situation has been building at AF Amistad High, and I'm writing now as it has growing implications for the rest of AF and the external community. We know that -- as the impact ripples across AF -- you may get questions or concerns from parents or students, and we want to share the key points that can and should be communicated broadly.

Today, a story was published in the New Haven Independent. The story included video footage of Principal Morgan Barth improperly restraining a student. Before I share anything else, I want to be clear about this: the conduct shown in the video is unacceptable. When this incident happened, we conducted an internal investigation, documented the incident in accordance with state laws, and worked with the student's family—including sharing the video with them. Morgan was disciplined and also required to attain additional restraint training.

The same news article includes comments from an AF Amistad High staff member who resigned this week and also posted a video on Facebook detailing a long list of concerns about the school. While some of what is shared in that Facebook video is not accurate – and we're proud of the many great things happening for kids at AF Amistad High— it speaks to real problems that impact our families in a real way. And we need to use this as an opportunity to address them directly. As we continue to reflect on this situation, we have committed to hiring an independent organization to conduct an analysis of how we could have handled it better and how we can we deal with charges of misbehavior of senior leaders in a way that reflects our values. As part of their work, they will talk to teachers, school leaders, network leaders, students, and parents. Then we will share the findings and recommendations with school leaders in the coming months.

Morgan has stepped down, effective immediately. We had planned for his transition at the end of the year, and we have been searching for the best successor to lead the school into the future. Given the current situation, he was clear that he is not the person who can lead the school in an effective response. Tomorrow, we will announce the sitting AF principal who will be stepping in to lead AF Amistad High on an interim basis through the rest of the year. We will also have news to share soon about the new principal for next school year.

I hope I've made clear why I am sharing all this, and that it's not to shame Morgan ... not to defend him... but not to shame him or put all of this on him. You will all have your own reactions, but let's all imagine that our worst moment was broadcast across the network and step into his shoes – at least as part of our own processing. Morgan has given 15 years of service to the kids of AF. He was part of the founding team of Elm City College Prep Middle, posting exceptional results as a teacher. Later, he became principal of three different schools, Elm City Elementary, AF Bridgeport Middle, and AF Amistad High, helping each of them make

significant student achievement gains. In response to that October incident, Morgan never did anything with us but name his complete embarrassment and regret at what happened. He apologized and communicated how he messed up – and shared his willingness to accept any consequence given the seriousness.

There is so much about this that is downright painful, but we have to seize any opportunity it presents to be a stronger network.

We are figuring out the right mechanisms for processing and organizational learning. For now, please reach out to your principal, team leader, or coach to share any feedback or questions.

This is not a proud moment for AF, and I'm not going to close out by trying to put a silver lining on it. Right now, it's about how we choose to respond. Students and families will need us to be at our best right now. They will need more than ever to hear and see from you what you bring every day – a care for and belief in every student.

And my focus is on making sure we respond in way that we will be proud of -- one that reflects who we are ... and who we can be.

Sincerely,

Doug

**Key Bullet Points for Broader Communication:**

- A story in the New Haven Independent features video footage of Principal Morgan Barth improperly restraining a student. The conduct shown in this video is unacceptable. When this incident happened, it was addressed through multiple measures – we conducted an internal investigation, verified with the New Haven Police Department that no laws were broken, documented the incident in accordance with state laws, and worked with the family – including sharing the video with them. In addition, Morgan Barth was disciplined and required to attain additional restraint training.
- While many of the issues raised in the Facebook video detailing concerns about the school are not accurate – and we're proud of the many great things happening for kids at AF Amistad High—it speaks to real problems that impact our families in a real way. And we need to use this as an opportunity to address them directly and double-down on changing the school for the better.
- Principal Morgan Barth has stepped down, effective immediately. We had been planning for his departure at the end of the year, and we will name a successor for 19-20 very soon. A sitting AF principal will be stepping in as interim principal through the rest of the school year.

- We are inviting the school community to talk to senior AF leaders about the school to directly engage on what we need to do better. AF cabinet members Fatimah Barker (Chief External Officer), Amy D'Angelo (Regional Superintendent), and Doug McCurry (co-CEO & Superintendent) will be at the school in the coming days to talk through concerns.

-----  
**Doug McCurry**  
***Co-CEO & Superintendent***  
**Achievement First**

**From:** Doug McCurry and Dacia Toll  
**Sent:** Tuesday, January 22, 2019 10:24:00 AM  
**Subject:** More Reflections

AF Team & Family -

We promised to circle back to address the issues raised about Amistad High School – knowing that many of them go beyond that one school and speak to issues raised across all of our regions.

We first want to say more about the video of Mr. Barth and a scholar that has shaken all of us. At the time of the incident, we conducted an investigation. With a lot of information in front of us (including interviews on what led up to this encounter), we concluded the conduct was unacceptable and disciplined the principal – but we fell short of concluding he should be terminated. The regional superintendent worked with the student and his family, including a direct apology from the principal to them. We communicated clearly and formally that any further physical contact with any student would result in termination. There was no question that what happened was unacceptable, and we thought our response was equally clear. But we're not focused on defending ourselves. The opposite ... we need to pressure test not only our decision but the lead-up and the aftermath.

Our board is moving forward with our recommendation to hire an independent firm (reporting directly to the board) to evaluate our decision-making in this case, including what the appropriate response should have been, and the final report will also recommend how we can refine our policies and practices for situations like this. We have also asked the board to use the final report to determine if additional consequences should be implemented, including for the two of us. Bringing in an outside firm to evaluate our actions is unprecedented – but warranted.

We had a long meeting with the AF Amistad High team on Friday. They are furious with us, and they have every right to be. We have a long road ahead to rebuild trust. But, as they said, the issues at play go beyond this video – and beyond this one school.

Five years ago, Common Core ushered in an academic reckoning for our organization. We had to look in the mirror and face the fact that we had pegged our “academic bar” *not* to a standard of true college or career readiness, but to low-rigor state exams. We had to acknowledge that we were all expecting too little from our scholars and ourselves when it comes to deep thinking. But we looked in the mirror – including at issues of power, race and class -- and we changed. We are now a national model for *AP for All* and high academic expectations.

And this team has taken on other challenges. We confronted high suspension rates and cut them in half across AF. We confronted a lack of diversity and made changes to our hiring and retention practices that resulted in school teams that are now, on average, more than 50% black, Latino, or First Gen. And again in our approach to special education and supporting our most struggling scholars academically.

But now we are facing another reckoning. And that reckoning is around the investment, non-academic preparation, and overall school experience of the students we serve. It didn't start last week. It has been building for years - and it goes to the heart of our mission and whether we're supporting our kids' journey to college and beyond. And it also has everything to do with race, power, and privilege.

Let's seize this moment to get more blunt and direct. Are our culture systems racist? Our culture systems – and any part of our core program that is executed with power over purpose and without an *abundance of care and deep respect for the kids and families we serve* – is racist given the communities we are honored to serve. There are many classrooms and schools at AF where the adults lead with love and students are empowered -- and there are too many where that is not yet the case.

This issues isn't as simple as a yes/no on our school culture systems. It's deeper. We started Achievement First to address the racism we saw in education-- low expectations and under-resourced communities of color denied access to schools that would equip students to be successful in college and life. But we were too slow to recognize and address the way racism, the smog we all breathe, manifests in our own schools and network. As you know, this year we've engaged the entire network on a process to redefine our values. And our network has spoken loud and clear about the need to be an anti-racist organization and to embrace the pursuit of racial equity as a core value. Now we need to look at all of our practices with an anti-racist lens to ensure the what (the structures we have in place) and how (the animating spirit of love that should drive high expectations) are strong.

There is also much more we need to do. Our senior leaders have started anti-racism training and self-reflection that must deepen and continue. We need to move in a different direction with

our school culture priorities (including more clearly going after mindsets, relationships, and SEL), and we are looking for a new VP of Student Experience (formerly VP of School Culture). You all said loud and clear at Day of Practice that we can't continue to make the mistake of seeing school culture as separate from daily instruction. Now that we have student motivation data across schools, we have to go after it like we did achievement or suspension data. We need to learn more from our schools with the strongest results. We have to get clear within our 5-year plan on the non-negotiables of the AF student experience. We need to more actively elevate staff, student, and family voices. And we need to use that to evolve our approach to teacher and leader training.

As we take on this work together, here's what we ask from all of you:

1. **Be part of the solution.** If you see something, say something. We need to be as strong as we can possibly be. If you have a concern or a problem, tell us. If for some reason you don't feel heard at your school, email your superintendent. If you don't feel heard by your superintendent, email us directly.
2. **Hold your head up high.** This was a bad moment for AF. And we need to own it and use it to get better, faster – but this one story is not all that defines us. Read [this editorial](#) about how our Rhode Island teammates and kids are “the gem of the state” because we are proving what's possible for low-income students. Or [here](#) to see NY1's coverage of our 5th and 6th graders studying neuroscience. Or [the videos](#) of our first (dream) college acceptances starting to stream in. So many of you and our scholars are making us proud every damn day and we don't want our failings to overshadow you.
3. **Believe that we can do it again.** We didn't “solve” our low academic bar overnight. Or slash our suspension rates. But we did start overnight. We are asking you to trust and believe in our collective super-power of growth mindset and that it will propel us to change our student and family experience in the places and ways we need to.

Most importantly, care for our kids and each other and be the change our scholars and communities deserve.

With love,  
Doug & Dacia

NOTE: After 20 years, Dacia is supposed to be on sabbatical now but has come back online to help ensure we are doing all that we need to do at this critical time for our organization.

**From:** Doug McCurry and Dacia Toll  
**Sent:** Thursday, February 7, 2019 12:13:30 PM  
**Subject:** Moving from Reflection to Action

## **AF Team and Family -**

We wish there was a way to talk with all of you, and we don't like adding to your inbox ... but the last 3 weeks have been the hardest weeks we've ever had leading our network, and we want to share updates and additional reflections.

First, we want to apologize. What happened at AF Amistad High School is a failure of our leadership. We matched the leader to the school and oversaw his support / management and the investigation of October's incident. When we first communicated after this incident, we didn't boldly and clearly say we messed up and that we were deeply sorry for letting our kids, families, and staff down. We inaccurately called what happened a restraint. And we did not clearly treat the scholar involved in the incident as the primary person who should be receiving our care and concern. In that moment, we needed to regroup in our standards -- that the physical and psychological safety of our students is our most sacred promise.

We can't go back in time. We CAN ensure that the pain from our failure is channeled for change. Suffice it to say, this has been a leadership crucible that we never want to pass through again. Dacia returned from sabbatical and spent last week at AF Amistad High. We took personal responsibility for failing to be the leaders that community needed. We listened to the anger, hurt, and concerns of students, parents, and staff -- and what they need to move forward. It will be a long road back to heal the broken trust, but the process has begun. The high school community has rallied around the new principal, Emery Sykes, who exemplifies values-based leadership. The school staff have come together in a powerful and mission-driven way to leverage their voice and the voice of our scholars to help shape the future of the school. Fatimah Barker and Shannon Garfield have stepped up to be there nearly full-time to support them. We couldn't be more grateful for this entire team.

But the real change that's needed is not at one school. In fact, our principals challenged us several months ago to make important shifts in how we operate as a network -- and that change is already in motion. We shared with principals in November a draft of the top 4 ways we think AF needs to change -- and recent events have only highlighted that we need to do more, faster.

1. AF needs to shift from a focus on increasing diversity to boldly leading for racial equity.
2. AF has had too low of a bar for school culture for too long, and we need to act urgently and intentionally to create the empowering student experience our scholars deserve.

3. It feels like there is an accountability double standard (with less accountability the higher you go in the organization). We need to be more consistently warm demanding with everyone at AF.
4. AF needs to shift its decision-making processes to be more inclusive process and to dial up the voices of the people closest to the work.

These changes align to our emerging vision of what must be our focus for the next five years at Achievement First: **great teaching** fueling an **exceptional student experience**. These two priorities are intertwined. We can no longer separate school culture from instruction. Rigorous, thinking-based, discourse-rich, engaging instruction is the number one driver of a great student experience, and a joyful, high-expectations, relationships-based culture supports great instruction.

You can find an [overview of network changes](#), along with updates on what we've done and will do. This is a start. If you read that document and have thoughts you want to share, we want to hear from you. Please share your thoughts [here](#). There is so much to be proud of at AF -- and much that has made us successful over the last 20 years. But core to who we are has always been growth mindset, and it's time for the next chapter at AF.

In that same spirit, next month we will wrap up the journey we have taken as an entire network to redefine and reclaim our values. Those values are being created by you (look out for another input opportunity next week to help us get the specific language right). Given recent events, it feels like we need the clarity and compass of strong, shared values now more than ever. We will be first in line to recommit to them. We hope these values -- and these four core changes -- will position us to be ever-more the Achievement First that our scholars and families deserve.

With love,

Doug and Dacia